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The Jesuit Mission in Higher Education

My Perspective

By Linda LeMura

There's been a great deal of interest in and enthusiasm about the fact that I am the first lay female president of a Jesuit college or university, which has been exciting and flattering. In my view, this occasion is entirely in keeping with the Jesuit tradition of braving new worlds and challenging the norm. The Jesuit order is known as much for its commitment to innovation and change as it is for rigor and tradition, and I think my presidency demonstrates that fact.

An educational experience in the Jesuit tradition is often described as an academic endeavor designed to prepare students for success in their personal and professional lives. We often hear words like "rigorous," "holistic," "systematic," and "transformative," and these descriptions are, in fact, remarkably accurate. However they do not capture the complete essence of what I believe is our distinctive way of proceeding in the educational enterprise.

Jesuit education emerged during the Renaissance, a period of intellectual fervor in which we find the origins of 21st-century interdisciplinarity: the insight that all discrete conceptions of knowledge are connected and in conversation. The fruit of that early genius continues to evolve today. The narrative of Jesuit education is a story of evolution and – here's a term that may seem at odds with the idea of intellectual rigor – of love. In this case, the love that characterizes a Jesuit education is not a narrowly defined love of self or the tempting addition of things but a pursuit of knowledge

for its own sake, the yearning to solve problems and to worship mysteries. This is indeed a kind of love story. We at Le Moyne maintain our resolute commitment to a core education that transmits the love story of the human experience through literature, rhetoric, philosophy, theology, history, mathematics, and the social and natural sciences.

The highest standard of Jesuit education insists on a strong ethos of stewardship of the intellect and the heart. This powerful combination gives rise to a love of God and neighbor, what we often refer to as a "Jesuit learning family," that other institutions of higher learning try to emulate. Graduates of our schools often have a genius for loyalty and deep friendships. We cultivate a desire for lives of meaning, love, empathy, and passion that can evolve only after a formation period of intellectual progress. We insist that our students engage in the intense study of the human road map with faculty members who have a passion for the life of the mind and who use their creativity in teaching and research to tell the evolving love story of God and humanity so that they, in turn, aspire to the highest fulfillment of their potential. ■

Linda LeMura became the president of Le Moyne College on July 1, 2014; she served in administration there, most recently as provost and vice president for academic affairs.